

## **COVID Relief Fund helps get running water into homes of rural low-income residents**

FiveCAP, Inc., a rural Community Action Agency serving residents in four Michigan counties, rolled out a life-changing Water/Plumbing Assistance Program

April 2, 2021 -- A disabled veteran and his school-aged daughter living in rural Michigan lost the source of water to their home in 2019 when the casing on their well failed. It couldn't be fixed and they couldn't afford a new one.

A man who inherited his small home when his father died had no running water because he couldn't keep up with the high cost of fixing broken plumbing and septic issues.

A rural family was still living without running water in their home five years after their well went dry.

These are not isolated cases, says Mary Trucks, executive director of FiveCAP, a community action agency that helps residents in Manistee, Mason, Lake and Newago Counties transition from living in poverty to becoming economically independent. Trucks can tell you stories of at least two dozen more homeowners in her region who were coping with similar problems this fall.

“So many of our rural residents have an annual income of less than \$12,880, which is the federal poverty level,” she explains. “Often they’ve inherited their rural home or they bought it on a land contract. They have a place to live, but they don’t have the wherewithal to make expensive repairs or to replace things such as the well or septic tank. Most of the residents are elderly or disabled or both, and their only income is social security.”

They are resourceful. They haul in jugs of water filled at the homes of friends or relatives who may let them shower there too. Some have access to a shower where they work or they use the facilities at a local senior center. Others, in warm weather, use the outside faucet at gas stations to shower and wash clothes. Rainwater is often collected for washing dishes, and the left-over wash water is used to flush toilets.

The FiveCAP Community Needs Assessment shows there are an estimated two hundred households in the FiveCAP service area that lack complete plumbing. It's a hardship, to be sure. But when COVID-19 moved into Michigan, living without water or plumbing quickly escalated to a critical matter of health and safety.

In August, FiveCAP received \$115,000 in federal COVID-19 relief funds specifically to address plumbing and water issues of low income homeowners. Marisela Lugo-Gonzalez, director of FiveCAP's weatherization and housing program, began making phone calls to well-drillers and plumbers, knowing their schedules were already full and that the grant expired December 31.

“The response from contractors was very gratifying,” says Lugo-Gonzalez. “They understood the urgency. They know FiveCAP and what we do for the community’s residents. They wanted to make time for the twenty-seven clients living under the federal poverty level who applied for the assistance and were approved, and we were able to reassure contractors that because of the grant, they would be paid quickly.”

By October, wells were being dug, septic systems were functioning, and indoor plumbing leaks were being repaired. Some wells had to be dug to a depth of 200 feet, at a cost of more than \$9,000 each.

November and December were mild so the outdoor work continued.

January rolled in warmer than average. *A blessing* Trucks says. She also received notice that the grant was extended to February 15. Racing against time and weather, the work continued.

Then, in early February, a Polar Vortex abruptly pushed Michigan’s temperatures into single digits. The ground froze. The work stopped.

Twenty-one grateful households had running water, working septic systems and plumbing up to code.

A few days later, when the grant expired, \$22,000 was left of the funding and had to be returned.

Six households remain on the waiting list.

“When we think about water issues faced by people with low incomes, we usually assume they can’t pay their monthly water bill,” says Trucks, “but rural residents have to maintain a well and septic system or go without. They don’t have the option of hooking up to municipal water and sewer lines. They often have conditions of poverty that are hidden, and this program brought to light what they have to do to get by.”

“Twenty-one households now have what they need,” she adds, expressing gratitude for the contractors who made it happen. “Twenty-one families had no reason to hope for help, but this program came along and changed their lives.”

*FiveCAP is one of more than 1000 community action agencies in the country established out of President Lyndon B. Johnson's landmark Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, and the advocacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The organization provides a range of services including early childhood education, food and nutrition programs, affordable housing, weatherization of existing homes, and emergency assistance, all aimed at offering individuals and families with limited income the opportunity to become socially and economically self-sufficient.*